

# PLANNING BRIEFS

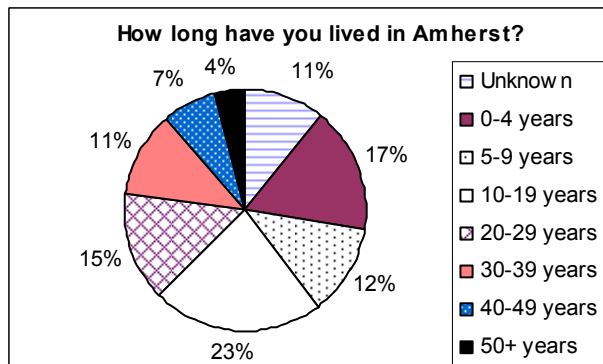
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## PLANNING AMHERST TOGETHER STAGE I— RESIDENTS SHARE THEIR IDEAS

Planning Amherst Together is Amherst's public process for creating a master plan designed by the citizens of the town. The resulting master plan will serve as a "blueprint" for the future, and will guide decision-making affecting Amherst's development. During the month of October, five Idea Gathering Sessions were held, at which citizens were given a chance to express their views, hopes, and aspirations for Amherst, while listening to other residents share their ideas.

The Comprehensive Planning Committee and the Amherst Planning Department made extensive outreach efforts to promote attendance at the Idea Gathering Sessions. When participants were asked where they had heard about the meetings a common response was, "Everywhere!". Email blasts were sent out, posters were plastered around town, and flyers event to schools for distribution to students and parents. A total of 428 citizens participated over the course of five meetings. Another 49 participants took part in meetings held in Spanish or with the English as a Second Language program, bringing the total number of participants to 477. Exit questionnaires showed that participants



were diverse in terms of their length of residence in town, the area of town they lived in, and income levels. The only apparent gap was the turn-out from those under the age of thirty-five, who represented only nine 9% of those attending.

During the Idea Gathering Sessions, group work was led by volunteer facilitators which

included area residents, Amherst High School students, and students and faculty members from higher education institutions in the area. Before working with their small groups, facilitators attended a training session led by the master plan consultants—ACP Visioning & Planning.

Facilitators led participants through two exercises designed by ACP- *Ideas for the Future* and *Strong Places, Weak Places*. Participants were asked "What should be done to make Amherst the best that it can be in the coming years?" Participants were free to bring up ideas on any topic they would like, everyone got a chance to speak, and ideas were recorded in the words of the participant. *Strong Places, Weak Places* engaged citizens in examining their physical environment. Groups were assigned a specific topic to focus on, based on community elements legally required by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in master plans including land use, housing, economic development, and others. Each participant identified three strong and three weak places throughout town relating to their group's topic. Participants then shared their ideas by placing green and red dots on a large map (green for strong, red for weak). After everyone had an opportunity to add their dots, the groups looked at where the largest concentrations of dots fell. They then identified what these places were and worked to define what made

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Idea Gathering Photos: (Top) Assembly at Immanuel Lutheran Church, (Bottom) Facilitator John Fox writes ideas. by Alan Root

### RECOMMENDED WEBSITE

Follow the Master Plan process on the Planning Amherst Together website.  
[www.planningamhersttogether.org/](http://www.planningamhersttogether.org/)

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## POMEROY VILLAGE STREETScape DESIGN

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On July 26, 2006, a public meeting was held in South Amherst to discuss the future streetscape design of the intersection of West Street and Pomeroy Lane, an area referred to as “Pomeroy Village”. Approximately 30 citizens braved the summer heat to listen to the history of the intersection and its current development as a mixed-use village center, and to discuss issues and concerns with the roads and pedestrian infrastructure in the neighborhood.

The meeting also showcased the debut of computer 3D visualization as a planning tool for the town. Cana McCoy, a planning graduate student at the University of Massachusetts, developed the model which lets users take a “virtual tour” of the current road and sidewalks of the Pomeroy area, and also of possible future designs.



Earlier this year, a survey had been distributed to residents in the area, and owners, employees, and customers of local businesses. The return of 128 completed surveys was a strong showing of interest, and a detailed report of the results is available on the Planning Department’s web page. Some of the survey results were used to decide which issues to address at the public meeting, and which potential development scenarios to model.

Particular points of concern for local residents raised at the meeting included the installation of sidewalks along the complete length of Pomeroy Lane from West Street to the South Amherst Common, and crosswalks to strengthen connections between people and local businesses. Pedestrian safety is one of the most important issues for many people. Special mention was made of the need to assure the safety of local children walking to either the Crocker Farm School or the Munson Library.

The 3D visualizations created for this meeting can be easily reused or combined with other GIS data that the Town has, and used to create new pictures of additional potential changes in this neighborhood as needed. This ability, and the heightened public interest in Pomeroy Village generated by the survey and meeting, will hopefully lead to a quality neighborhood planning process with a high degree of understanding on all sides.

As Amherst moves forward with the new master plan, these sorts of 3D visualizations could be used in a variety of ways including the designs of other streetscapes, placements of civic and recreational facilities, and analysis of possible zoning changes.

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## SMART GROWTH GRANT– A NEW LOOK AT ZONING

The Town of Amherst has been awarded a Smart Growth Technical Assistance Grant for \$25,000 by the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs. Senior Planner Niels la Cour applied for this grant in June of 2006.

The grant funds will be used to develop and implement a public participation process in which computer mapping Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and 3D visualization technology are used to explore the application of Form-Based Zoning to Amherst’s village centers.

Amherst is fortunate to have a state-of-the-art GIS system and is beginning to implement 3D Visualization technology into its planning work. Amherst’s 3D planning to date includes work by former Planning intern Cana McCoy, who created a 3D database showing the current layout of Pomeroy Village at the intersection of West Street (Rte. 116) and Pomeroy Lane. This work is being used to help design streetscape improvements and will be available for future village center planning, as well. The firm Green Mountain GeoGraphics is currently creating a realistic 3D presentation of the downtown area for use in future planning. The Planning Department will continue to build the Town’s 3D database by modeling the other village areas where the community has long indicated it wants to concentrate future growth. The next village center to be modeled in 3D will be the south end of historic East Amherst Village—that work is being done by Planning intern Amy Lash. Anticipating and designing for the future through visualization and simulation techniques is one of the most powerful methods for making informed planning and design decisions.

Amherst’s planning efforts have long been influenced by the Town’s traditional New England settlement pattern- a strong Town Center

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and several other village centers surrounded by agricultural land and open space. While Amherst has done a very good job of preserving its open space, the town has not been as successful at directing new residential and commercial growth to its village centers. The current zoning regulations encourage or discourage different kinds of specific residential, business, or institutional land uses by district and through dimensional regulations governing physical density. Form-Based Zoning can take a more active and prescriptive role in developing village centers.

Form-Based Zoning is a relatively recent innovation in land use regulation that focuses more heavily on predetermining the end state of physical design. Proponents argue that concentrating on a community's physical form will lead to improvements in the way the affected areas function, fostering more pedestrian friendly, mixed use developments with a broader range of housing types. The codes are developed with a general end result in mind which includes building alignment to the street, the spaces between buildings and their relative heights, and where open spaces like parks are to be located. The codes rely heavily on graphic representations of building form and design standards, adding predictability to the process. This project will be a unique opportunity to support Amherst's master plan (its first since 1969) with Smart Growth and Sustainable Development Principles.

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## STAFF SPOTLIGHT: JONATHAN TUCKER

**Jonathan Tucker** is the Amherst's current Planning Director, a position he has held since February of 2006, having served for 2 ½ years prior as interim Planning Director. Hired 21 years ago (August 1985) as the Assistant Town Planner, Jonathan later became a Senior Planner.

An Amherst native and a product of the local school system, Jonathan received a Bachelor of Science degree in Natural Resource Studies (1979) and then a Master's in Regional Planning (1987) from UMass-Amherst. Prior to joining the Amherst Planning Department, he held a wide variety of jobs throughout the region involving environmental consulting, regional planning, and energy conservation.

Jonathan reports that his favorite part of working in Amherst is that "It's never boring—there's always something new going on, and it's often quite progressive because of the nature of this community." He notes that while Amherst's emphasis on endless public process can be frustrating at times, it guarantees that the Town is carrying out the wishes of its citizens, and is one of the reasons the community welcomes progressive planning. Some of the results of Jonathan's work can be seen in the heart of Amherst. Over the years, he has provided staff support for a number of boards and committees whose projects have produced significant physical changes in downtown Amherst. These include the Design Review Board, Amherst Redevelopment Authority, Disability Access Advisory Committee, Parking Commission, Historical Commission, and numerous others. The tangible results of their efforts can be seen in many downtown projects, including the ongoing downtown streetscape improvements, improvements to Sweetser Park, the Boltwood Walk parking garage, and, more recently, the Amherst Community History Mural in West Cemetery.

Jonathan's work with the Planning Board's Zoning Subcommittee helping to update and improve Amherst's zoning regulations has been an ongoing responsibility. He indicates that he looks forward to completion of the community's master plan because it will provide an opportunity to undertake changes to the Zoning Bylaw and the Official Zoning Map that are in support of clearly-articulated community goals.

Jonathan has been involved in many historic preservation projects in Amherst. For several years, he served on the Board of Trustees for the private non-profit Amherst Historical Society which operates the Amherst History Museum at the Strong House. His interest in local history can be attributed in part to having grown up in Amherst and the fact that his family's roots go back to some of the earliest European settlers of New England and the Valley. Another strong interest is his Scottish ancestry—an active member of Scottish clan organizations, he hosts clan tents at Celtic festivals and highland games throughout southern New England. He reports that while everyone with Scottish ancestry should celebrate it, only those who have the legs for it should wear a kilt.

Jonathan spends as much free time as he can outdoors, hunting and fishing, often in Amherst. He lives in Florence with his wife Gina (a medical practice administrator), his 18 year old son Daniel, and a deaf but sweet 12-year-old chocolate lab named Molly.



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*"We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."* - Aldo Leopold



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## FORMER AMHERST PLANNING DIRECTOR INDUCTED INTO AICP COLLEGE OF FELLOWS

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Robert ("Bob") P. Mitchell, former Amherst Planning Director, has been inducted into the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP). Election to the Fellowship may be granted to planners who have been longtime members of AICP and have demonstrated excellence in professional practice, teaching and mentoring, research, community service, leadership, and communication. Planners certified by AICP may use the letters "AICP" after their name. Fellows are designated with the letters "FAICP." Currently, more than 15,000 practicing urban and rural planners in North America and elsewhere have AICP certification. Of those, less than 350 have attained the status of Fellow.

In addition to his many years as Planning Director for Amherst, Mitchell has contributed much to the planning profession as a leader, former President of the Massachusetts Chapter of APA, former AICP Commissioner, an adjunct professor at the University of Massachusetts, and as a practicing planner. He was one of the co-founders of the Citizen Planner Training Collaborative, a statewide training program for planning officials. Mitchell is the first graduate of the UMass Department of Landscape Architecture & Regional Planning (LARP) to be inducted into AICP's College of Fellows. Currently, Bob Mitchell serves as Special Assistant for Sustainable Development with the Massachusetts Office for Commonwealth Development in Boston.

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### BOARD & STAFF NEWS

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The Planning Board has acquired three new members since June. **Kathleen Anderson** is an artist and resides on East Hadley Road. She has interests in social justice. **Richard "Dick" Howland** came to Amherst as boy in 1952 and has lived and worked in the Amherst area ever since. He graduated from Deerfield Academy, Amherst College and Columbia Law School. He practiced law in Amherst for 33 years and he now teaches full time at the High School of Science and Technology in Springfield. He has been a Town Counsel to several towns or represented the planning departments of other towns. **Eduardo Suarez** is a native of Panama. While living in the Pioneer Valley he has been involved with a number of community organizations including Neuva Esperanza and the Holyoke Planning Network. He is an advocate for sustainable development and wants to contribute to improving the quality of life for Amherst residents.

**Al Woodhull** is a new Associate Member of the ZBA. He has been a Town Meeting Member for 14 of the 21 years he has lived in Amherst. A computer professional, Al has worked at Hampshire College and UMass. He lives on Strong Street. He enjoys hiking and skiing in Amherst's natural areas and playing softball on Town playing fields.

In staff news, **Amy Lash** joined the Planning Department in September as an intern. She is a second year graduate student in the Planning Department at the University of Massachusetts. Prior to this she attended the University of New Hampshire where she studied Tourism Planning & Development and she taught youth sailing lessons in her hometown of Newport, RI.

Senior Planner, **Niels la Cour**, has been elected as the President of the Northeast ARC Users Group (NEARC). NEARC is one of several independent regional organizations that represent users of Geographic Information System (GIS) software developed by Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI). One of NEARC's main purposes is to host conferences where GIS users can share ideas about the application of GIS technology.

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### IDEAS GATHERED... (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

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these places strong or weak. The atmosphere and exercises proved to be conducive to dialogue, learning, and fun. Many participants indicated the meeting was valuable to them because they heard new ideas from others, or they felt reassured that their ideas were shared by other residents of the town.

From these sessions over 2,000 ideas covering a wide variety of topics were recorded. Common themes emerged, including (but not limited to) adequate services for families and seniors, improving town/gown relations, reducing automobile dependence, and keeping Amherst affordable. All ideas residents contributed at these sessions were recorded and will be used to shape the resulting Master Plan. To see all of the ideas and learn more about how the Idea Gathering Sessions will shape the creation and vision of the plan visit: [www.planningamhersttogether.org](http://www.planningamhersttogether.org).

The next stage of Planning Amherst Together will involve Working Groups, which are being formed to turn these diverse community ideas into coherent and concrete statements of Town intentions. The Working Groups will begin meeting in January and proceed at least through May. Each Working Group will address an aspect of a master plan required under state law. For more information about the process contact:

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Planning Briefs is available on our website at <http://www.amherstma.gov/planning>

~Prepared by Amy Lash, Graduate Intern, Amherst Planning Department~